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ABSTRACT

In teaching a course on the history of the German language, it is preferable to use the linguistic approach, which deals with the structure of language and those linguistic events which characterize the development of contemporary German from Proto-Indo-European, rather than the cultural approach, with emphasis on extralinguistic data. The main arguments in favor of this viewpoint are: (1) in most German major or graduate programs the students will have little other opportunity to experience a linguistics course and should therefore be given as heavy a dose of linguistics as possible; and (2) the cultural aspects of the history of German can be picked up much more easily by the students as an adjunct to their other classes, or on their own. Such language history courses should also give attention to contrasting German and English. The students taking such courses will be mostly Americans who plan to teach German in America. Knowledge of the historical bases for irregularities in German and of the main linguistic features which distinguish it from English should make language teaching easier for them. Many examples are given from phonology and some from grammar where such knowledge would be useful in explaining language phenomena. (Author/TL)

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On Teaching the History of German as Applied Linguistics

There are basically two different approaches which can be taken in the teaching of the History of the German Language. The cultural approach, which is generally considered the more palatable for the majority of the students, places strong emphasis on extralinguistic data, such as the origin and migrations of the various tribes, Germanic mythology, the nature and origin of the runes, it gives some attention to the early literary monuments and development of the literary language of the various periods, etc. The purely linguistic approach, on the other hand, is concerned almost exclusively with the structure of the language and those linguistic events which characterize the development of Contempory German from Proto-Indo-European. Such a course is usually considered to be most appropriate for those students who want to concentrate on Germanic Linguistics rather than on Literature.

I think a case could be made for taking either of the two approaches, or even a combination of the two, as is probably frequently done - especially in many of the smaller departments. However, in this brief paper I will simply offer some arguments in favor of a first course designed for the nonspecialist but nevertheless taught within a purely linguistic framework.

In my opinion there are two compelling arguments in favor of the purely linguistic approach: (1) in most German major or graduate programs the students will have little other opportunity to experience a linguistic course and should therefore be given as heavy a dose of linguistics as possible; (2) the more cultural aspects of the History of German can be picked up much more easily by the students as an adjunct to their other classes, or on their own.

Although the depressed job market has apparently somewhat dimmed the students' demand for relevance in their courses, I am old-fashioned enough to be able to assert that teachers have an obligation to try, as far as possible, to relate the coursework to the students' goals. We ought to take into consideration that the vast majority of our students will not be specialists in Germanic Linguistics, the History of German or Philology. But it is safe to assume that the greater part of an audience in a History of the language course will be Americans who plan to teach German to Americans in America. The result should therefore be quite different from the traditional type of course which apparently originated in Germany, where it was naturally taught for Germans who planned to teach German to Germans in Germany. I want to suggest that a first course on the development of German have an applied linguistics orientation and that it pay some attention to the structure and history of English in contrast to German. The overall purpose of such an approach would be to aid potential teachers in the teaching of basic language courses, an area which normally receives too little attention.

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Since it is primarily the active use of the synchronic system of contemporary German that most of our graduating teachers spend most of their time teaching, the basic question that should be asked in a History course is: what is there about the structure of contemporary German that is linguistically interesting from a historical point of view? When approached in this fashion it should be clear even to literary specialists and department chairmen that it is preferable for the language history course to be preceded by an introductory course on the linguistic structure of Modern German - preferable that is, to courses on the older dialects, as was presumably expected in the German University system. It would of course be ideal if all students had the luxury to study several of the older Germanic dialects previously, but surely that would be an unrealistic expectation nowadays. Besides, a solid grounding in theory is essential to the application of linguistics.

In the following remarks, in which I will attempt to illustrate this investigative procedure, I will assume a previous course in the structure of Modern German. To begin with phonology then, there is no obvious reason why the phonological system should be traced back to PIE or even to MHG, unless it is approached from a contrastive point of view - that is, with English as a backdrop. What does it matter to the speaker of contemporary German, whether he be native or not, that German once had no front rounded vowels or that the consonant system was completely reshuffled in the past? But for the native speaker of English the front rounded vowels are unnecessary intruders, whose existence needs to be justified. The Germanic and OHG consonant shifts are not evident from the synchronic system, but a glance at the obstruent inventories of English and German - even without reference to vocabulary - reveals phonemes, not shared by both languages, that relate directly to the two shifts, namely the þ and the đ in English and the so-called ich-ach-Laut in German. Such observations lead quite easily to questions concerning the reasons for the divergence of the two phonological systems and in particular to the origin of the German system.

It would of course be foolish to expect any students to show much of an interest in studying or memorizing a chart which simply traced the phonemes from PIE to NHG. The usual way to try to breathe some life into these sound changes is to relate them to representative vocabulary. But I see no reason - except for tradition - why even Waterman's History of German, which is clearly designed for an American audience, uses Gothic words to demonstrate the reflexes of the Gmc. consonant shift, when examples from modern English would serve the same purpose. Furthermore, since so much of our current English vocabulary is of Latin origin it is usually not necessary to use obscure Latin words to represent the PIE stage. Thus, instead of Latin pecu and Gothic faihu, which Waterman uses to demonstrate the change of p to f, the immediately recognizable words Latin pisces and English fish would be more accessible to the student.

When discussing the OHG consonant shift, examples from Modern English are quite obviously even more appropriate for demonstrating the obstruent system before the change. The effects of Grimm's Law, as evidenced in the vocabulary of contemporary German and English, can be used quite effectively - as is often done - to make clear the precise but rather complex relationship between such words as hearty, herzlich and cordial. But it seems to me that many students miss an equally important point, which is touched on briefly by Ross Hall in his reviews of German dialectology handbooks in the 1974 PSGP Yearbook.

Hall notes that dialectology is often considered a poor stepchild among the linguistic offerings in the German program. As a result future teachers often have a poor understanding of the relationship between the structure of Modern Standard German and the other modern German dialects. How many students are there who have memorized Grimm's law with appropriate examples, including the vagaries of the Rhenish fan, etc., who nevertheless have the impression that there is somehow a closer linguistic affinity between the High German dialects and Low German than there is between these dialects and Standard German?

Not long ago a graduate student in Biology reported to me that, when he had German, he was told by his teacher that nobody in Germany would understand the German used in class because most Germans spoke only Low German. I feel quite certain that this student's misconceptions are at least partially of his own manufacture, but could he have gone that far wrong if his teacher had had the facts straight? Or does it not matter what biologists imagine the linguistic situation in Germany to be?

An applied linguistics approach, which would make use of the effects of Grimm's Law together with some post MHG vowel changes and morphological and syntactic developments, should be able to explain adequately that modern standard German is superior primarily in its social prestige and not in its structural purity or complexity. The set of records by Bethge and Bonin, which contains a few of Wenker's sentences in 36 different modern dialects, provides an excellent point of departure. These records can be used to show that the High German dialects share in general the effects of the OHG shift and thus sound more like standard German, whereas the Low German dialects sound more like English in this respect. In addition, other phonological data, such as the preservation in Alemannian of the MHG monophthongs î, û, iu and the diphthongs, ie, uo, üe, for example, provide unforgettable evidence that contemporary Standard German is a runaway maverick in regard to certain linguistic features.

To most scholars working in historical linguistics today the study of dialectology and language change leads very naturally to the study of primary language acquisition, which in turn has some significance for second language learning in adults. There are some solid arguments in favor of the theory that much language change is brought about by kids in their attempts to create their

own grammar from the oral language data they are exposed to. In this respect it should be instructive to students to realize that the generation gap is very old in that it is the little Proto-Germanic Old High German kids who are very probably responsible for a number of the massive changes that have taken place in the development of German. For misinterpretation of an aspirated voiceless stop as a stop plus fricative, or the production of an unrounded front vowel in imitation of a front rounded one, or the leveling of a paradigm as a result of the generalization of a morphological rule are very common occurrences in first language acquisition as well as commonly attested historical changes. If teachers could be encouraged to look for parallel or similar evidence of language learning strategies in adult language acquisition, they might be more tolerant of their students' ungrammatical creations and perhaps be in a position to offer more constructive criticism.

To return briefly to the development of the phonological system, the most obvious question to ask in regard to the vowel system is: where did modern German get its front rounded vowels? In answer to this question one would of course want to include a careful explanation of the assimilation process and subsequent loss of the conditioning factor which brought about the new phonemes and to point out that English shows the effects of the same process in the pluralization of a few nouns. But it would not be necessary to reconstruct the PIE or even the Proto-Germanic vowels systems, or to discuss the beautifully complex variety of umlauts in Old Norse, in order to explain sufficiently the origin of the so-called umlaut vowels in Modern German.

It is only when one looks at cognates such as Saat and seed or Bein and bone, whose vowels reflect different developments in English and German, that it is necessary to go beyond OHG. Although for me the development of the vowel system in Germanic is much more interesting linguistically than is the history of the consonants, I doubt whether many students would benefit much from memorizing the great number of vowel changes which took place. But they should be able to profit somewhat from a presentation which demonstrates the systematic linguistic processes which result in such diversity as is found, for example, in the cognates Baum and beam and Tod and death, whose vowels all are reflexes of Proto-Germanic au.

I would agree with a suggestion made by Cecil Wood in a recent issue of the Unterrichtspraxis, that we should de-emphasize the importance of the memorization of so many sound changes and appropriate examples. But rather than focus instead on texts of the different historical periods, which he offers as an alternative, I would like to see the students gain a better appreciation for the nature of language by discovering that, in spite of many exceptions, language change is at base a very systematic and natural phenomenon. Future teachers ought to become aware of the significance of natural historical processes so that they can understand that the effects of umlaut are very different from the effects of vowel harmony, as in the alternation between nehmen and nimmt, or the

effects of Verner's Law, as in schneiden and schnitt, both of which have resulted in residues with no current functional value. The effects of vowel harmony and Verner's Law are therefore also very different from the internal change found in the strong verb system, which due to its current nonproductivity, also has the appearance of a residue irregularity, but is in fact functionally a competing system with the dental preterite. The different functions can, of course, also be explained in purely synchronic terms, but I don't think teachers can really appreciate the current significance without the historical explanation.

It is easy to allow phonology to dominate in a course on the History of German - just as I have done in this paper. But I think it is safe to say that most German majors find the history of morphology and syntax more attractive and perhaps also more beneficial. Here also I propose that the best way to begin is by asking questions concerning the origins of especially those linguistic features in which German and English show a different development. But just as with phonology there are also irregularities peculiar to German whose current existence warrants explanation. Some of the obvious questions to ask are: Where did German get its four primary plural markers, none of which is like the primary plural marker of English? What is the origin of the various verb classes, the counterfactual subjunctive, the use of werden as both a passive and future tense marker, the noun phrase system, weak nouns? How and why did German and English develop such divergent word order?

Since I have very little time left, I will finish with a brief discussion of only the noun phrase system for which I believe a historical explanation not only has obvious practical value but also ties in with other linguistic characteristics which distinguish German and English.

For a monolingual speaker of English the endings of the adjectives and so-called ein and der words are pure junk, until their essential function is understood. Unfortunately, even many teachers seem to feel that the inflectional system is an archaism which should be presented at best as a quaint but cumbersome museum piece. But historical analysis shows that, in contrast to English, German took a very innovative step when it transferred the pronominal r to the definite article and thus tightened up the inflectional system. As a result of this tight system German was able to develop a very flexible word order and a different means of topicalization.

The preservation of an overtly marked case system also ties in very well with the retention of a clear distinction between causative and non-causative verbs. It explains why in contemporary English it would be possible for a teacher to use previously non-causative verbs to sit a student in the corner, to stand her book on the desk and to lay down to rest. In other words, the use of the accusative after causatives and the dative after non-causatives in German is a factor in the preservation of the clear distinction still made in case system of contemporary German.

I have often been asked by teachers how they could integrate historical explanation into the teaching of basic courses. In spite of what I have said so far, I think that in a course which has the active use of the language as its primary goal, discussion of diachronic aspects should be kept at a minimum. But I am nevertheless convinced that teachers of basic language courses have an easier job and more fun if they have a general picture of the historical bases for irregularities in German and of the main linguistic features which distinguish it from English.

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